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ABSTRACT

Initially an assignment for a library science class, this paper presents various definitions of the current creative writing phenomenon called "sudden fiction" (very short short stories with concise character sketches, and terse tales limited in length to several pages). The paper includes: (1) a list of well regarded sudden fiction anthologies; (2) a list of reviews of those anthologies; (3) a reference to additional collections of stories by such writers as Robert Coover, Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka, and Guy de Maupassant recommended by informed scholars in the field; and (4) a list of periodicals (including editors' names) that publish sudden fiction. (SAM)

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16 December 1992

TITLE: "Sudden Fiction: What Is It?"

sud.den fic.tion *noun* Succinct stories, concise character sketches, and terse tales limited in length to several pages. See synonyms: auto-rich fictions, blasters, ditties, etudes, fables, flash fictions, four minute stories, micro fictions, mini fictions, minimal fictions, minitures, minute stories, one page stories, prose poems, quick fictions, short short stories, short shorts, shorter stories, shortest stories, skinny fictions, skippers, snappers, spurts, stos, supershort fictions, tales, thrifty anecdotes, very short short stories, very short stories, and vignettes.

Pardon the prolix entry, which no doubt is incomplete, but it may aid the novice in grasping the vitality and variety of this little genre. Each of the synonyms has appeared in print, either in published form or in correspondence from authorities in the field. Silly as some of these sound, they assist in defining the topic; the more cynical scholar may see this as just another pedantic caucus race.

As part of a library science class taught by Paul Gregorio at Portland State University I was assigned the task of seeking information regarding some obscure topic: sudden fiction entered my life. In keeping with the theme I'll be brief and avoid discussion of my search strategy, the point of the assignment. What I shall offer are some sources for those who want to know more about these sudden fictions, which in some critics' eyes must not top 750 words in length. More verbose folks set the limit at 2,500 words. Some editors see these works as single page pieces while others stretch the maximum length to five pages.

Anthologies are the place to begin in genre appreciation. The following three works stand tall in this field: Shapard, Robert and James Thomas. Sudden Fiction:American Short Short Stories. Salt Lake City: Peregrine

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Smith Books, 1986. ISBN 0-87905-248-1; Shapard, Robert and James Thomas. Sudden Fiction International: Sixty Short-Short Stories. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989. ISBN 0-393-02718-X; and Thomas, James, Denise James, and Tom Hazuka. Flash Fiction: Very Short Stories. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992. ISBN 0-393-30883-9. If children's literature is your bent, look to Lewis, Shari and Lon O'Kun. One Minute Bedtime Stories. Garden City: Doubleday, 1982. ISBN 0-385-15292-2.

A small number of reviews have been written on these monographs which will assist the student of sudden fiction. They include the following: Studies in Short Fiction, volume 24, page 79; New York Times Review of Books, 7 January 1990, page 16; Publishers Weekly, volume 239, 1 June 1992, page 57; Library Journal, volume 114, December 1989, page 175; Publishers Weekly, volume 236, 15 September 1989, page 113; North American Review, December 1990, page 59; and English Journal, November 1989, page 84.

Additional collections of stories to consult would be those recommended by hip scholars, such as the writings of Robert Coover, Ernest Hemingway , Jim Heynen, Franz Kafka, and Richard Kostelanetz-who is important as both writer and critic. His critical works include The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature and The Old Fictions and the New. Guy de Maupassant's short stories are essential reading in the study of sudden fiction, as so many short story readers consider this French writer the master at literary brevity.

My search was greatly aided by periodical editors, whose positions ranged from the established scholarly to the very small and very alternative. I want to give credit to all those willing enough to aid a stranger, regardless of the degree of information they provided.

Kim Stafford
Northwest Writing Institute
Lewis and Clark College
Portland, Oregon

Lorna Martens
Virginia Quarterly Review
Charlottesville, Virginia

Shirley Jellum
Columbia High School
White Salmon, Washington

Michael Moon
American Literature
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

Elizabeth Spencer
Sewanee Review
University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

Carol Porr
Twentieth Century Literature
Hofstra University
Hempstead, New York

Laurence F. Hawkins
Trout Creek Press
Parkdale, Oregon

Virginia Miller McDonough
The Writer
Boston, Massachusetts

Eric Wirth
Modern Language Association
New York, New York

Mary Vanue
Cutbank
University of Montana
Missoula, Montana

Robert W. Howington

Homemade Ice Cream Press
Fort Worth, Texas

the folks at
Taproot
Ambridge, Pennsylvania

Andre Scheluchin
Wicked Mystic
Astoria, New York

Michael Hathaway
Chiron Review
St. John, Kansas

Michael Puttonen
Contexas
Dallas, Texas

Robert Nagler
Dead Rebel News
Oxford, Pennsylvania

Michael J. O'Shea
Studies in Short Fiction
Newberry College
Newberry, South Carolina

Richard Kostelanetz
New York, New York

Robert Shappard
Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing
University of Hawaii
Honolulu, Hawaii